


Spring 2011

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# Incorporating Accreditation into Strategic Planning in Academic Libraries: A Look at Nine Libraries in Washington State

**Daniel CannCasciato**

Daniel CannCasciato is Head of Cataloging at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. He can be reached at: [dcc@cwu.edu](mailto:dcc@cwu.edu).

## **Introduction**

Accreditation for universities and colleges is a milestone achievement. Failing an accreditation review can have a dire impact on an institution. A successful accreditation process should be a major goal of all involved at the institution, as it brings with it a validation of that institution. The academic library is included in accreditation reviews, so library personnel should plan to succeed in the process. The purpose of this article is to investigate whether such planning is evident or explicit in the mission and planning documents of nine academic libraries in Washington State.

## **Literature Review**

*"Regional accreditation is the most highly regarded form of institutional accreditation."* (Heu, 2009, p. 256)

*"Southeastern University has lost its accreditation, and officials at the 130-year-old school say they do not expect to offer a fall term."* (De Vise, 2009, B2)

As the previous citations show, accreditation of a university or college is an important achievement. Accreditation brings with it opportunity, but does not of itself guarantee institutional success. "Accreditation of an institution ... certifies to students and the general public that the institution has appropriate purposes and the resources needed to accomplish its purposes; can demonstrate that it is accomplishing its purposes; and gives reason to believe it will continue to accomplish its purposes." (Heu, p.250-251) Accreditation also qualifies an institution as eligible to receive and disburse federal grants and student loans, which has an impact on its ability to attract and retain students (Lee 2008, p.2; "Grambling State University Has Accreditation Restored," 2004).

The academic library has a role in the accreditation process and must contribute to the review. A number of authors, for a number of years, have suggested ways academic libraries can approach the self-study process and utilize it. While often not explicitly stating that planning is a required component of addressing accreditation requirements, the subject is implied by the fact that they propose actions; actions require at least minimal planning.

Bangert and Gratch (1995) suggest a number of ways that librarians other than the dean or director can involve themselves in the self-study process. They suggest that these individual leadership roles are important "To improve visibility and credibility outside the library" and recognize that accreditation is a "milestone moment" in the life of an institution (p. 698). Proposed actions include the collection of syllabi and the co-development of program review assessment strategies.

In her investigation of four institution's accreditation processes, Casserly (1987) noted several characteristics of successful and unsuccessful ones when she examined the self-study process as a planned change process. In her article, the term "successful" refers to the perceptions of participants regarding the planned change process criteria, not the outcomes of the accreditation visits. She noted that the "commitment" of those in leadership positions had a significant impact on perceptions of success. Lack of commitment often was linked with lack of success. While she did not define what commitment was, it can be inferred. She notes that additional outcomes are potential outcomes of self-studies: "These data indicate that a number of outcomes ... were not realized or perceived to be realized ... Among these are the development of an ongoing system of institutional research, self-analysis, and self improvement, all aspects of rewards and most aspects of ownership ... " and then further wrote "that other than helping to achieve accreditation they usually did not benefit or improve the institution," (p. 89-91 and p.94 respectively). In general, if the result of a self-study is merely the production of a report, then the process is perceived as unsuccessful and the leader perceived to lack commitment. Perhaps follow-through is a term that helps describe a component of what is lacking in commitment.

Kells (1988), notes a similar lack of success, or lack of follow-through. Regarding the intentions of conducting a self-study, he wrote that "It is probably fair to say that with a few notable exceptions the second and third or the basic intentions (improvement and a better, ongoing study capacity) have resulted far less frequently from program self-studies than many have hoped for." (p. 98).

Thus, commitment in the self-study process can be demonstrated by the results, which should include more than only a report. There should also be ongoing self-study capacity and organizational improvements; reward could perhaps be a third condition and could be demonstrated in one way by the provision of the funding needed to implement improvements or shore up deficiencies (Cf. Budd, 2005, p. 162.)

Wolff (1995) sees the campuswide impact of involvement in ways similar to those of Bangert and Gratch. He also sees as potentially beneficial the outside review that is an inherent part of the accreditation process, "There is an opportunity now to use the accrediting process to stimulate fundamental rethinking of the mission, role, and operation of the library. ... the self-study is reviewed by a team of outside evaluators who can validate and influence the future direction of the library ..." (p. 77). He sees the review process, as did Casserly, and Bangert and Gratch, as a useful tool. It is one means of clarifying and defining the "library's mission in relationship to the institution" (p. 81) that can "define what contributions to student learning are expected from it. These direct and primary educational goals should become part of a library mission statement" (p. 85).

Lindauer (1998) sees it much the same way: "librarians, in collaboration with faculty in the disciplines and other academic staff, need to define for their institutions the key functions and resources perceived to be directly (or indirectly) linked to valued outcomes, such as student learning, teaching, and scholarly activity." (p. 560).

These authors see the self-study process as an opportunity to make accreditation not only a requirement, but a constructive event in the organizational health of the library, to clarify its mission within the larger institution, and to promote the profile of the library and librarians campuswide. They identify similar potential benefits, while also identifying that not achieving those benefits is both somewhat common (Kells) and results in a less successful self-study, whether accreditation is achieved or not (Casserly).

Budd (2005) and Lindauer (2002) note that the accreditation standards and the review processes have a budgetary characteristic. Budd notes that "If financial support has been diminishing, accreditation may be used as a tool to persuade the administrators of the college or university that the accrediting body would look more favorably on the institution if support for the library were enhanced." (p. 162). Lindauer notes that "Librarians also speculate that [standards] without specific text to describe the expectations for collections, and size of staff and budget some institutional leaders might decrease the level of support for libraries and learning resources." (p. 16).

Overall then, the accreditation review can help the library with the clarification of its mission, its prominence and role on campus, and perhaps its budget as well. The standards academic libraries and their parent institutions must meet, however, are not stagnant. Bollag (2006), Lee (2008), and Lindauer (2002) all demonstrate that the criteria and the process for accreditation reviews are dynamic. Lindauer (1998) also notes that librarians "often do not organize their data and other supporting documentation in ways that are accessible or meaningful to academic administrators and accreditation teams, nor do they use language that reflects what is used in campuswide planning documents." (p. 547).

The issue of necessary planning is implicit in the previously cited articles and has been suggested for well over a decade. The topic of planning is spotlighted most clearly by Barker and Smith (1998), who wrote:

"Accreditation fits into the strategic planning model with the assumption that the articulated goals include a statement that the requirements of the accrediting agency will be met at the time of the next review ... When strategic plans are reviewed, incorporating a review of the "must" statements of the accrediting agency ... serves to make self-study on ongoing process. Further, with the current emphasis being given to accountability, if (when) institutions must respond to outside agencies on specific issues, the processes will be in place. "

Has such a clear approach been incorporated in practice?

## **Case Study**

Mission statements, vision statements, and strategic planning are routine accessories / paraphernalia to academic library web sites. For this case study, I collected web accessible mission, vision, and planning documents for nine academic libraries in Washington State. I chose the six publicly funded institutions and then three others in an effort to anonymize the results. (*NOTE 1*) I then searched those documents for references to the accreditation process that all must undergo. The results are in TABLE I. As is shown, accreditation, while sometimes noted, has a non-existent profile as a goal or strategic objective in these documents.

Three examples of accreditation being mentioned demonstrate its importance. In one case, a commendation was used as an example of pride in accomplishment:

"The Libraries was commended in the University's [previous] accreditation review for its rich collections, well-qualified staff, and "exceptional service to students, staff development, and a commitment to planning and assessment of service." "

On the other hand, a recommendation from the review team led to actions to address the shortcomings:

" ... the [accrediting agency] requested a focused interim report to address ... [the] Libraries' lack of engagement in "a fundamental and thorough planning effort, informed by assessment, to consistently support the University's academic mission."

The third example is:

"The agenda for the University Library during [this academic year] was set by the need to write the first draft of the ten-year Accreditation Report ...All of this was preparation work for the Accreditation visit ..."

(This statement demonstrates an almost ad-hoc approach to accreditation, yet accreditation is nothing if not a predictable requirement.) Collectively, all three demonstrate that accreditation studies can have a significant impact in various ways.

In none of the libraries examined is a successful accreditation review made a prominent goal (based on the information taken from the documents available), rather, it remains a lacking element in mission and planning documents. Succeeding in such a manner that the library's processes could become a college or university model to follow, as in Heu's case (p. 255), could, and perhaps should, be stated. Currently, though, the accreditation self-study appears to be undertaken as a sort of add-on duty and not as a fundamental objective. Planning, prominently, for accreditation self-studies could bring benefits already mentioned as well as alleviate many of the issues with accreditation visits. Budd (2005, p. 161) has noted that it's necessary to anticipate needs and concerns that accrediting teams might have. Lindauer (1998, p. 546-547) wrote noted the issue of organizing and presenting data in meaningful ways to both internal administrators and external reviewers, and Wolff (1995) noted that doing so requires time and planning, because "... as time pressure builds to complete a written report ... there is an inevitable reversion to traditional indicators of quality. Developing new approaches to self-study and team evaluation requires significant preplanning and conceptual development" (p. 79).

Standards are not stagnant (as mentioned earlier) so it's important to be aware of them. Mission and goal statements abound with statements of proposed goals; placing accreditation success as one of those goals can help an organization focus its activities and avoid failure or mandatory interim reviews. Barker and Smith state that it is worthwhile to have incorporated the accreditation process into the strategic plan, so that the organization is ready for the process when it happens - - and it happens at predictable times.

In the documents reviewed there are areas where a successful accreditation review could be named as an explicit goal. Libraries allude to outside agencies in their planning documents and mission statements; doing so is not an alien concept. As already shown, accreditation has made its way in some manner into a few of the documents. Analogous references to processes similar to accreditation reviews are also evident. Examples of such statements and the potential for accreditation requirements being noted are:

[Institution 2] *"The Libraries pursue goals of excellence in faculty ... by meaningful administrative and peer review."*

Peer review for the individual could parallel the process of peer review for the organization.

[Institution 8] *"We aspire to exceed the needs and expectations of the [academic] community ..."*

Exceeding accreditation expectations could be highlighted as well.

[Institution 9] *"Examine organizational initiatives and structures from successful academic libraries ..."*

Specify that to be considered a successful library, the library examined must have been successful in its accreditation review.

## **Conclusion**

Accreditation is a milestone event for an academic institution and its academic library. Based on the review of available documents from nine academic libraries in the state of Washington, such incorporation of the accreditation review process has not happened. Accreditation remains, at best, only implicit in the missions and goals of those libraries. At worst, it is simply an event that happens on a regular basis with little institutional preparation and groundwork in place. There are opportunities to spotlight accreditation reviews and success a goals in academic library planning documents. As Barker and Smith (1998) recommended, the process could be incorporated into the strategic planning process by proposing in such plans a goal that "the requirements of the accrediting agency will be met at the time of the next review" and by "incorporating a review of the "must" statements" into the process." They continue, "Further, with the current emphasis being given to accountability, if (when) institutions must respond to outside agencies on specific issues, the processes will be in place."

*NOTE 1 The documents reviewed are not cited for reference to preserve anonymity; the purpose of the study was to examine the prominence of accreditation in general, not at specific institutions.*

## **Works Cited**

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Table 1

INSTITUTION*	DOCUMENT REVIEWED**	ACCREDITATION NOTED
1	Strategic plan and goals (Current)	No.
2	Plan 2000-2005 (Revised recently)	Yes; Acknowledges the process exists.
3	Mission statement (A few years old)	No.
4	Annual report (A few years old)	Yes; Explains the impact of preparation for the accreditation visit.
5	Mission statement (Undated)	No.
6	Mission statement (Undated)	No.
7	Strategic plan and goals (Current)	Yes; Advertises the positive commendation of an earlier accreditation visit.
8	Mission statement (Undated)	No.
9	Strategic plan and goals (Current)	Yes; Explains that planning is being undertaken as part of the actions needed to produce a required interim report for the accreditors.

\* Institutions are listed in a randomized order (<http://www.randomizer.org/>)

\*\* Documents have been given standardized titles and were viewed in December 2010.